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Chapter One

Conceptualising Gender

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Introduction

What do we mean by gender? The meaning of the terms sex and gender, and the ways that writers have theorized the relationship between the two, have changed considerably over the years. Prior to the 1960s, gender referred primarily to what is coded in language as masculine or feminine. Gender has subsequently been variously theorized as personality traits and behaviours that are specifically associated either with women or men (for example women are caring ; men are aggressive), to any social construction having to do with the male-female distinction, including those which distinguish female bodies from male bodies; to being thought of as the existence of two different social groups 'men' and 'women' that are the product of unequal relationships (Alsop et al., 2002; Connell and Pearse, 2014). In this latter sense, gender is understood as a hierarchy that exists in society, where one group of people (men) have power and privilege over another group of people (women) (Delphy, 1993). More recent postmodern approaches, associated with the work of Judith Butler (2006, 2011) in particular, conceptualize gender as performance; where gender is understood as continuously produced through everyday practices and social interactions.

We need to understand these theoretical changes around the concept of gender not only in a historical sense, but also in terms of cultural context. In other words, it is important that we ask whether gender as a concept translates in different countries and cultures in a manner that is analytically useful. For instance, ‘in Scandinavia there are no separate words that cohere with the Anglo/American sex/gender distinction (Lempiainen, 2000). In Slavic languages, the same word is used for both terms (Bahovic, 2000). In Germany, the term gender has several meanings including grammatical and as a biological/social category (Wischermann, 2000)’ (Robinson, 2006: 224). So we must not assume that gender as a concept is universal. Rather, as Walby (2004) argues, we need to develop understandings of gender that allow us to theorize both cultural variation *and* historical changes in understanding gender and gender relations. Historically it has been theories from the global North, in particular North America and Europe, which have dominated approaches to understanding gender. This has led to criticisms that theories largely based on western understandings have colonised ideas about gender in so far as they are extended to non-western contexts in ways that erase local understandings and cultural meanings. Connell (2007) makes this point in arguing for the need to recognize social theory from societies in the ‘global South’, which are often ignored or marginalized. The ‘global South’ is a relational concept that emphasises unequal forms of power relations, both historically (colonial regimes for example) and contemporarily, between the North (the West) and South (the ‘rest’). In this binary way of thinking the ‘global South’ can be understood as a umbrella term comprising a given set of countries or continents, typically many countries in Africa, Central and Latin America, and parts of Asia. However, as Connell (2007) suggests, such a binary view

is overly simplistic and therefore we need to think critically about the use of the term 'global South' if we are to avoid the dangers of over generalisation and reproducing Western-centredness in analyses of genders and sexualities (see also Brown et al., 2010).

This chapter outlines the major changes that have taken place since the second part of the twentieth century in how we define gender. It begins with an examination of the use of the terms gender and sex and the distinction made between them, what is commonly called the sex/gender binary. In this discussion, I will illustrate how feminist gender theory has played an important role in developing our understandings of sex and gender. The chapter then goes on to discuss the development of theories of gender within feminism, as well as the contribution to understandings of gender made by queer theory. In this section, I will look at how different theoretical approaches have led to different understandings of gender. The final section of the chapter examines the relationship between gender and sexuality. This is important because, as I shall demonstrate, our understandings of gender are closely connected with the concept of sexuality as well as sex.

The sex/gender binary

During the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, it was the theories put forward by biologists, medical researchers and psychologists that dominated understandings of gender. These early accounts were mainly concerned with establishing 'natural' or 'biological' explanations for human behaviour. Researchers sought to discover underlying 'sex differences' which they believed produced different psychological and behavioural dispositions in males and females.

They spoke of sex not gender and did not distinguish between the two as we often do today. Within these *naturalistic* approaches sex is conceptualised in terms of *binaries*: male/female; man/woman; masculine/feminine. In this binary thinking male and female are understood as ‘opposites’ who, despite their differences, compliment one another. This pairing of ‘opposite sexes’ is seen as natural. Gender here is understood to be a biological ‘fact’, a persons ‘sex’, which is pre-given and located in the body. This is an *essentialist* approach: a way of understanding the human self as having a timeless, universal biological ‘essence’ that exists beyond the bounds of social life. Although, as I shall go on to discuss, the precise location of ‘sex’ in the body (for example ovaries/testes, chromosomes, or nerve centres in the brain) has been the subject of considerable debate.

At the time, few within the social sciences questioned these ‘scientific’ theories about sexual difference. For example, as Seidman (1997) argued, classical sociology both drew on and contributed to understandings of sex, gender and sexuality as binary categories ordained by nature. However, this was to change dramatically in the second part of the twentieth century as debates about how we conceptualise gender steadily grew. In the 1960s and 1970s a new way of thinking about gender began to emerge that critiqued earlier ‘essentialist’ frameworks, signalling a shift away from biologically based accounts of gender to social analysis. This shift from naturalizing to *social constructionist* accounts, although not necessarily denying the role of biology, emphasised the importance of social and cultural factors in defining gender.

At the same time as social scientists and historians were beginning to challenge the assumption that gender was rooted in ‘nature’, more and more people were beginning

to question dominant ideas about gender roles. The late 1960s, early 1970s saw the emergence of both women's and gay and lesbian liberation movements in the US and Europe (D'Emilio, 1998; Stein, 2012, see also Charles in this volume). An important contribution to the study of gender at that time was the distinction that many of those involved in sexual politics - along with some sociologists, psychiatrists and psychologists - sought to make between the terms sex and gender. Sex referred to the biological differences between females and males defined in terms of the anatomy and physiology of the body; gender to the social meanings and value attached to being female or male in any given society, expressed in terms of the concepts femininity and masculinity. This distinction between sex (biological) and gender (cultural) is what is termed the sex/gender binary. A number of key assumptions associated with the sex/gender binary are summarised below.

The Sex/Gender Binary

- A distinction can be made between sex (biology) and gender (culture)
- Sex is biologically given and universal
- Gender is historically and culturally variable
- Sex consists of two - and only two- types of human being
- This two-sex model of sexual difference (the distinction between females and males) is a natural 'fact of life'
- One sex in every body
- Identities develop as either one or other of these two sexes/genders

Studies of transsexuality were also very important to the differentiation between sex and gender. The sex/gender binary made it possible to imagine that a person could feel themselves to be a particular gender trapped in the 'wrong' sex, for instance a person who felt themselves to be a woman and feminine (their gender identity) but who had a male body (their sex). This was difficult to account for without allowing for a separation of body (sex) and gender (identity). (See also Hines in this volume.)

The sex/gender binary was also an important aspect of early feminist work and has since provided an important foundation for much feminist theory and politics. Feminists have used the sex/gender binary to argue for social change on the grounds that although there may exist certain biological differences between females and males, societies superimpose different norms of personality and behaviour that produce 'women' and 'men' as social categories. It is this reasoning that led Simone de Beauvoir (1953) in the feminist classic *The Second Sex* to famously remark 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman'. We cannot, de Beauvoir argues, understand womanhood or manhood as fixed by nature, rather this is something that is acquired through the social process of *becoming gendered*.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s feminist writers expressed similar views in developing the idea of the sex/gender binary. Ann Oakley, for instance, argued that it was important to distinguish between two separate processes that, at that time, she claimed were often confused. That is:

...the tendency to differentiate by sex, and the tendency to differentiate in a particular way by sex. The first is genuinely a *constant* feature of human society but the second is not, and its inconstancy marks the division between 'sex' and 'gender': sex differences may be 'natural', but gender differences have their source in culture, not nature (Oakley, 1972: 189, emphasis added).

Oakley takes sex for granted in assuming that we all 'have a sex', sex is not something we acquire it is a constant, part of being human. Gender, by contrast, she understands to be the cultural interpretation of our biologically given sex. It is important to acknowledge that, at the time, this distinction between sex and gender was hailed as a conceptual breakthrough and 'became one of the most fundamental assumptions in feminist gender theory from the 1970s on' (Alsop et al., 2002: 26). It was also very important to feminist politics as it supported the argument that the social roles men and women occupy are not fixed by nature and are open to change.

Anthropological work has also contributed significantly to these debates, highlighting the cultural variability of gender roles in different societies in different parts of the world. Of particular importance was Margaret Mead's work on gender which, although it was first published in the 1930s, was reprinted and gained considerable attention in the 1960s (Mead, 1935/1963). In her book *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* Mead described contrasting gender roles in three different societies in Papua, New Guinea among the Arapesh, the Mundugumor and the Tchambuli. What was seen as particularly significant was that Mead claimed that among the Tchambuli gender roles were in stark contrast to those in the US at that time, with women occupying dominant positions. Although her work has since

been subject to critique, it was a major source for the emerging women's movement and the development of theories of gender that emphasised the social construction of gender roles.

Sex as a social construction?

More recently, a new understanding of sex and its relationship to gender has emerged. The distinction between sex and gender has been challenged by arguments that sex is just as much a social construction as gender. Rather than thinking about sex and gender as separate from one another, sex being the foundation upon which gender is superimposed, gender has increasingly been used to refer to any social construction to do with the female/male binary, including male and female bodies. This has led to debates about whether it is useful any more to differentiate between sex and gender. On this basis, many feminist writers have questioned the usefulness of the sex/gender binary that years earlier had seemed a conceptual breakthrough.

For example, both Christine Delphy (1984) and Judith Butler (2006) have argued that the body is not free from social interpretation, but is itself a socially constructed phenomenon. It is through understandings of gender that we interpret and establish meanings for bodily differences that are termed sexual difference (see also Butler, 2011). In this model, sex is not something that one 'has' or a description of what someone is. Without the concept of gender we could not make sense of bodies as differently sexed. It is gender that provides the categories of meaning for us to interpret how a body appears to us as 'sexed'. In other words, gender creates sex rather than the other way around.

The variability of sex

Historical research supports the argument that understandings of the body are socially constructed. In *Making Sex*, for example, Laqueur (1992) argues that the idea that human bodies divide into two different sexes - male and female - only became commonplace during the nineteenth century. Prior to then, it was thought that male and female bodies developed out of one type of body. The idea of two distinct biological sexes is associated with the development of science and medicine (Colebrook, 2004). Historical studies also show that what biological 'facts' determine sex has been the subject of much debate. Chromosomes, hormones, gonads (ovaries/testes), internal reproductive structures and genitalia have variously been seen as the basis for defining a person's sex. For instance, studies of medical responses to cases of 'doubtful sex', - people who in the past were often referred to as third sex or hermaphrodites or more commonly nowadays intersex - suggest that definitions of what constitutes a male and a female body have changed. People born with a mixture of sexual markers, for example with both an ovary and a testis present in their body, challenged the idea that there is one 'true sex' in every human body and often resulted in disagreements between doctors over whether someone was 'truly' a male or a female (Dreger, 2000; Reis, 2012).

Studies of the medical management of intersex demonstrate how definitions of 'sex' have changed over time. What they also highlight is that the meanings of bodies and the assumptions made about the relationship between gender, identity and the body have varied from one historical period to the next (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Karkazis, 2008). During the nineteenth century, for instance, doctors believed reproductive

capacity - the presence in the body of ovaries or testes- characterized the sex of a person. This led in some cases to individuals being diagnosed a different sex to the one they themselves felt themselves to be. For example, in one case a woman who had lived all her life as female was 'diagnosed' as male because of the discovery of testes in the abdomen (Dreger, 2000). Here the truth of a person's character is sought in the body, not in terms of how the person identifies. This is in stark contrast with medical opinion from the mid twentieth century, as illustrated by studies of children diagnosed as intersex such as those carried out by John Money and Anke Erhardt (1972/1996) who put forward a theory of 'psychosexual neutrality' which emphasised the role of gender assignment and gender of rearing rather than biological 'sex' in determining gender development. Studies of transsexuality by Stoller (1968) and others at that time also demonstrated how biological 'sex' and gender were not always one and the same. Such studies were not only supportive of the development of the sex/gender (body/identity) binary, as I suggested earlier, they also led to a privileging of identity over body in defining gender (see also Woodward in this volume).

The continuing concern to resolve bodily ambiguity in cases of 'doubtful sex', despite the fact that medical knowledge has demonstrated that there are many variations of sex and human bodies are not fully dimorphic (always one thing or the other), demonstrates the *social* importance of sex and gender. It suggests that there are strong reasons for wanting to sort people into two different groups and to maintain the idea of two separate sexes. In the nineteenth century, according to Dreger (2000), the main concern was the fear of social disorder that doctors believed could result from 'misdiagnosed sex'. They thought that this would encourage both divorce and homosexuality. It is important to ask, then, why have doctors been so concerned to

‘resolve’ cases of ‘doubtful sex’? If intersex people lived in a world where sex/gender was not socially important then arguably being of ‘doubtful sex’ would not matter in the way it does. In recent years an intersex political movement has emerged and various intersex organisations have been established such as, for example, the Intersex Society of North America (Preves, 2005). Intersex activism includes those who object to the idea that human bodies should have to be defined as male or female, as well as campaigns to end unwanted genital surgeries for those considered to be intersex.

Recent studies of trans and intersex, as well as cross cultural work, have been important in continuing to problematize the gender binary system which divides people into the categories ‘male’ and ‘female’ (see Monro, 2010; Hines in this volume). This includes approaches to theorising gender diversity as an *expansion of gender categories* beyond a simple binary of ‘male’/‘female’ to include, for example people who identify as ‘third gender’.

There may then be two sexes but what I am suggesting here is that this is not a naturally occurring ‘fact of life’, rather it is a socially produced binary that exists because of the significance placed on defining bodies as gendered as either male or female. This is what has been termed the ‘medical invention of sex’, where bodies are literally shaped (operated upon) to fit the categories of sex and gender (Dreger, 2000; Karkazis, 2008). By doing this, medicine constructs a single believable sex for each ambiguous body removing any challenge to prevailing ideas about what constitutes an ‘appropriate’ male or female body/sex.

Expanding Sex/Gender Binaries: ‘Third Gender’

Anthropological studies of gender in non-Western contexts have also questioned sexual dimorphism in culture and history, based on western male/female gender binaries, through examination of gender diversity in different cultures that open up possibilities for new understandings of gender and sexuality. This includes Serena Nanda’s (1990/1999) ‘classic’ *Neither Man, Nor Woman*, an account of the hijras of India who are typically born with male physiology, although some later undergo removal of the penis, scrotum and testicles, and who may identify with various gender categories including as ‘third gender.’ The hijra communities have a long history in India going back more than four thousand years, although their position was undermined under British colonialism (Monro 2010). In 2014 the Supreme Court in India recognised hijras, as well as transgender people, as a ‘third gender’ in law. Other studies of ‘third gender’ categories that have contributed to challenging Western conceptualisations of gender and sexuality include, for example, those documented in the edited collections by Gilbert Herdt (1996/2003) and Peggy Reeves Sanday and Ruth Gallagher Goodenough (1990/1996).

In this section I have described how understandings of the relationship between sex and gender have gone through a number of important phases over the last fifty or so years.

- First, sex (male/female) defines gender (masculine/feminine).
- Second, a distinction is made between sex and gender (the sex/gender binary), where gender is understood as a social construct and sex is assumed to be a biological given.
- Third, like gender, sex is also viewed as a social construction (gender creates sex).
- Fourth, (as I shall go onto discuss) sex and gender have been combined. The term gender or 'sex gender' (Woodward in this volume) is thought to be more useful than distinguishing between the two.

I will now go on to consider theories of gender and the specific contribution made by feminist writers. In so doing, I will illustrate how the idea of gender has also undergone significant change.

Feminist gender theory

Feminists have critiqued essentialist understandings of gender and sex, and have played an important role in establishing a body of research and theory that supports social constructionist approaches. However, the main concern in feminist theories of gender is not simply to describe the ways in which gender is socially and culturally defined in any given society. For instance, whether 'being a woman' is associated with having the responsibility of childcare or whether 'being a man' is associated with being the principle breadwinner in a family structure. It is to develop understandings of how gender is connected to social, economic and cultural status and power in society. In this sense, *gender is theorised not as difference but as a social division*.

Traditionally the term social division was used in relation to class hierarchies in society, most commonly inequalities between upper, middle and lower class. The term social divisions is now used more broadly to refer to social, economic and cultural differentiation of groups in society on the basis of other criteria besides class, including gender, race, ethnicity. To theorise *gender as social division*, therefore, is to examine how the social reproduction of gender difference in society is connected with the production of gender inequalities between men and women (Abbott, 2013)

Gender role

The main focus of work on gender carried out during the 1970s and 80s was on exploring the production of masculinity and femininity. Many feminist writers, as I stated in the previous section, argued that gender is culturally determined and that we become differently gendered through socialization into gender roles, or as it was often termed then 'sex roles'. Sex role theory, drawing on the principles of social learning theory, claimed that through various learning processes (for example observation, imitation, modelling, differential reinforcement) and agencies of socialization (for example parents, teachers, peers, the media) children learn the social meanings, values, norms and expectations associated with 'being a girl' or 'being a boy' and thereby learn to develop ways of behaving and personality characteristics considered appropriate (or not) for being a woman or man (Alsop et al., 2002; Rahman and Jackson, 2010). Gender is here defined as the learning of culturally and historically specific social roles associated with women or men, and used to describe someone as masculine or feminine. This is what we might refer to nowadays as the process of *becoming gendered*, involving learning specific ideas, practices and values associated with gender.

Becoming Gendered

- Gender Labelling

Attribute terms boy, girl, woman, man to self and others

- Gender Knowledge

Culturally specific knowledge about gender

- Universality of Gender

The idea that all human beings 'have' a gender

- Gender Constancy

The idea that gender is unchanging

As Connell (2009/2014) points out, a great deal of research by social psychologists and anthropologists in particular has sought to explore the development of gender roles. That is, to explain the mechanisms of acquisition and the key sites of learning gender roles, as well as documenting variation in gender roles in different cultures (see discussion of Mead's work earlier). The socialization of a child into a specific gender role has also been a controversial issue more recently over the rights of parents to raise a child as 'gender neutral' with, in some cases, parents keeping the gender of their child a secret from all but their closest friends and family to reveal to avoid gender stereotyping.

However, feminist theories of gender, as I indicated above, are not interested in simply describing how girls and boys grow up differently and become gendered, and how that may or may not be resisted through education and parenting, but how a key

aspect of that difference is understanding that girls and boys, women and men, have different social status and value. This focus on *gender inequality* is on how gender role expectations, in particular the expectation that a woman's primary role is to be a good wife and mother, limits girls in a myriad of ways as they grow up, especially in terms of educational aspirations and the type of jobs they might end up doing.

Moving Beyond Gender?

Sweden's capital Stockholm is home to a 'gender neutral' preschool *Egalia*, which is the Swedish word for equality. The aim is to not limit children to social expectations based on their ascribed gender. Teachers avoid using gendered terms like him and her, and refer to children by their first names or as 'hen', a genderless pronoun taken from the Finnish language. Books are selected to avoid traditional presentations of gender and parenting roles. This reflects wider policy towards gender equality in Sweden. Breaking down gender roles is a core aspect of the national curriculum for preschools and many schools have gender advisors to identify language and practices that may reinforce gender stereotypes.

Gender as hierarchy

These early socialization theories of gender appear to us now as rather naïve and far too simplistic. From thinking about gender roles in terms of either masculinity or femininity, we now recognize that there are *multiple* genders and many patterns of masculinities and femininities what some refer to as gender pluralism or gender diversity identity (Monro, 2005). At the time, feminists were among those who

critiqued sex role theory, in particular pointing out that it was a highly mechanistic and static account of gender that attributed little agency to subjects who were assumed to acquire a certain gender role by simply internalizing what they had been taught. Feminists argued that such theories of gender were oversimplified as many young people reject what they are taught and resist social norms and cultural assumptions about gendered roles (Rahman and Jackson, 2010). This was clearly in keeping with the feminist political goal of challenging gender role expectations and norms which were seen as restricting women's lives.

By the end of 1970s feminist theories of gender were becoming increasingly more sophisticated. Some writers took Oakley's and other feminist critiques of essentialist understandings of gender a step further by questioning the existence of the category of gender itself. The development of such an analysis of gender is particularly associated with the work of materialist feminists such as Christine Delphy (1984) and Monique Wittig (1981/1992). Although Delphy and Wittig recognized the importance of demonstrating that the *meaning* of 'gender' is historically and culturally specific, they argued that the *concept* of gender should not be taken for granted. In other words, they questioned the idea that gender is a universal category, which it can be assumed will always exist in some form or other in all times and places. Instead, they defined gender as a *socially constructed product* of patriarchal hierarchies (Jackson, 1999). Gender here is understood to be the result of gendered power differences. For example, in her paper *One is Not Born a Woman*, echoing Simone de Beauvoir whose work I mentioned earlier, Wittig (1981/1992) argues that gender is an imaginary foundation, the outcome of a social hierarchy where one class of people (men) have power and privilege over another class of people (women). The categories 'woman'

and 'man' are relative, defined by a specific social and economic position in society. Gender is commonly thought to be the cause of one's social and economic position

(a). Here gender derives from one's place in the social hierarchies that exist in society

(b). In other words, gender is the mark of one's subordination as a woman rather than its basis.

(a) One's gender as 'Woman' leads to social subordination

(b) Patriarchal hierarchies define one as a 'Woman'

For those feminists who agree with such analyses of gender relations, the political goal of challenging gendered power differences will, as a consequence, lead to the elimination of the idea of gender. Gender categories would not exist if social divisions did not exist. This idea of a world without gender can be found in more recent feminist work that is not only concerned with social transformations towards ending gender inequality, but seeks a *de-gendering* of society that some writers refer to as 'undoing gender' (see Lorber, 2005; Deutsch, 2007). This approach argues for moving towards a non-gendered social order, based on equality without gender categorisation.

New conceptualizations of gender associated with postmodernism and the rise of queer theory emerged in the 1990s, which shifted the emphasis away from definitions of gender as fixed, coherent and stable, towards seeing gender categories as plural, provisional and situated. At the time, poststructural models of power, influenced by Foucault's work (Foucault, 1979), demanded a more complex account of gender as

hierarchy. Foucault's account of power moved away from the idea of power as something possessed and wielded by social institutions and particular groups in society, towards the idea that 'power is everywhere'; diffuse rather than concentrated and enacted through discourses rather than possessed. These new conceptualizations of gendered power relations were also connected with the partial shift in feminist thinking during the 1980s away from a primary focus on divisions between women and men, to theorizing difference between women, in particular of class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality and, associated with this, the problematisation of the category 'woman' (Mohanty, 1988; Bhavnani, 1997; see also Hines in this volume). What these developments highlighted was the need for theoretical approaches that recognized the complexity of social hierarchies and attempted to theorize the intersections of gender with other social inequalities through an *intersectionality* framework.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality has its roots in anti-racist feminism in the US. The term has been attributed to Kimberle Crenshaw, but work of other black feminists such as, for example, Patricia Hill Collins (1990/ 2000) in *Black Feminist Thought* and bell hooks (1981) in her book *Ain't I a Woman*, raised similar issues about the need to understand how gender intersects with race even before the term intersectionality was coined. Indeed, the fact that hooks named her book after the African-American abolitionist and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth's speech given at a women's rights convention in Ohio in 1851 demonstrates the even greater historical legacy of these concerns.

For Crenshaw:

...the concept of intersectionality [is used] to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's...experiences. ...my focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed. (Crenshaw, 1991:1244, 1245)

Since the 1980s and 1990s studies of intersectionality have proliferated across a wide range of contexts. There is no singular definition of intersectionality, rather there is a great deal of variation in the way it is now theorized and applied. Broadly speaking, intersectionality provides a way of understanding the interaction of different forms of disadvantage and inequality as a means of analyzing multiple identities and experiences of inequality, focusing on the linkages between categories such as race and gender. It means more than the sum of the parts such as, for example, the notion that black women are 'doubly disadvantaged' as a consequence of racism and sexism; and represents a move towards more complex models of understanding of how different forms of inequality are 'routed through one other' (Grabham et al., 2009:1). For instance, this might involve an exploration of how categories such as race, sexuality and gender are co-constituted; that is: the social processes through which these categories inform and shape each other. One of the criticisms that has been made of intersectionality theory is that there was a tendency to focus on race and gender to the exclusion of other social categories. More recent work has addressed this for example looking at the intersections between gender and other categories including class, age, disability and sexuality (Richardson 2007; Grabham et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2011; Richardson and Monro, 2012). **For a broader discussion of some**

of the other ways in which the concept of intersectionality has been problematized within feminist theory see, for example, Yuval-Davis (2006) and Anthias (2012).

‘Doing gender’: gender as performativity

It is the work of Judith Butler (2006, 2011) in particular that is associated with this theoretical shift and which has had a profound influence on theorising gender. (See also Hines and Woodward in this volume.) Butler’s work, especially her book *Gender Trouble* first published in 1990, has been highly influential in the development of *queer theory* (see p. 00 and Hines in this volume). In *Gender Trouble* Butler:

- proposes a new understanding of gender as performance;
- questions the usefulness of the sex/gender binary;
- suggests heterosexuality is an effect of gender.

Butler argues that gender is *performatively* enacted. In her early work she used drag to convey what she means. Typically drag is understood as impersonation: a drag queen is a ‘real’ man giving a performance as a woman. Butler argues that there are parallels between drag and the performance of gender in everyday life: gender is a kind of impersonation that passes for real. Gender is constituted out of attempts to compel belief in others that we are ‘really’ a woman or a man. For Butler, there is no ‘real’ gender of which drag is an impersonation. She claims ‘there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender’, arguing instead that identity is constituted by ‘the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’ (Butler, 1990: 25). What she means by this is that we assume that a person performed in a certain way *because* that person is a man or a woman. In this sense Butler’s notion of gender performance is

different from how the term performance is usually used; that is, to refer to a subject (the doer) who is formed prior to the acts s/he chooses to perform (do). For Butler, performances are *performative* in that they bring into being gendered subjects. The act of performance is productive rather than expressive of gender. It is through 'doing gender' that we produce the effect that there was some gendered person who preceded the performance: 'the doer'. This, for Butler, is a continual process. So while it might seem to us certain that a person is a woman, Butler is suggesting that this is not fixed or stable. Gender, it is argued, is a process of continuous construction that produces the effect (an illusion) of being natural and stable through gender performances that make us 'women' and 'men'. A person might seem to have a particular identity, but this is only because we keep doing things that maintain the appearance of us 'being the same'. Theories of performativity, then, challenge the idea that gender identities are simply 'always there', claiming instead we are constantly *becoming gendered* through performances that constitute us as 'women' or 'men' in a variety of ways.

One of the criticisms made of poststructuralist/postmodern accounts of gender is that they appear to have little interest in discussing material inequalities between women and men (Hennessey, 2012). This is seen as having serious consequences for feminist politics. For example, Martha Nussbaum has been highly critical of Butler's approach because she claims it is an individualized approach that is not concerned with social change that challenges the social injustices experienced by women (Nussbaum, 1999).

Butler also questions the idea that heterosexuality is natural. She argues that heterosexuality is 'unstable', dependent on ongoing, continuous and repeated

performances of normative gender identities, which produce the illusion of stability. There is no 'real' or 'natural' sexuality to be copied or imitated: heterosexuality is itself continually in the process of being re-produced. As well as *denaturalising* gender and heterosexuality, Butler also questions biological understandings of 'sex' in arguing that sex is as culturally constructed as gender. As a consequence, as I pointed out earlier in the chapter, she questions the usefulness of making a distinction between sex and gender. This disruption of the sex/gender binary has been identified by some feminist writers as being one of the most important contributions of queer theorists to feminist theory (Martin, 1998).

However, it is important to acknowledge similar arguments in the literature that precede postmodern/queer accounts of 'doing gender'. Ideas of about the making of identities through performance and performativity predate Butler and have their antecedents in work by people like Erving Goffman (1969) and Harold Garfinkel (1967), as well as earlier theories of gender. In their landmark article '*Doing Gender*', for example, Candance West and Don Zimmerman (1987) highlight the importance of everyday social interaction in the social (re)production of gender, and exposed the weaknesses of earlier socialization theories as well as structural approaches to gender. Similarly in relation to challenging understandings of the sex/gender binary, as early as 1978 Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna analysed transsexuality (rather than drag) as illustrative of the everyday 'doing of gender' in order to show how people are rendered intelligible to us as either 'male' or 'female' through the successful (or not) performance of bodily appearance and characteristics, behaviours, and language that we expect from men and women, and that we then interpret as a valid expression (or not) of their 'real' sex. Sex, in this sense, is

constructed through everyday social interactions that are reliant upon gender norms, which enable us to make sense of a person as 'male' or 'female' (Kessler and McKenna, 1978; 2000).

In this section I have described how the concept of gender has developed in a number of important ways. Theories of gender have problematized the gender binary system which divides people into the categories 'male' and 'female' in ways that allow for more complex understandings of gender. Within this literature a number of approaches have been identified: *expanding gender categories* by adding more genders (e.g. 'third gender'); *moving beyond gender* towards a society without gender categories (e.g. people who identify as 'non-gendered') and, arising out of poststructural theories that understand gender as fluid and plural, *gender pluralism* where gender is conceptualised as an intersecting range along a continuum that includes, for example, people who feel multiply gendered (see Monro, 2010 for further discussion of these different approaches). To summarize:

- Rather than a binary we now understand gender to be multiple and context specific;
- There is a shift towards more materialist and embodied accounts of gender;
- Greater attention is given to develop understandings of gender as a site of agency as well as inequality;
- Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding gender and its co-construction with other social categories/locations.

The first part of this chapter looked at how understandings of gender rely on particular understandings of the relationship sex has to gender. In the final section I will go on to examine the question of how the relationship between gender and sexuality has been theorized. This is necessary because our ideas about gender are also connected to ideas about sexuality. Indeed, in the majority of feminist theories of gender it has been assumed that ‘gender and sexuality have to be examined together’ (McLaughlin et al., 2012:1).

Gender and sexuality

Four broad approaches can be identified that have structured the study of gender and sexuality and ways of understanding their relationship.

Naturalist approaches

As I stated in the first part of this chapter, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century naturalist approaches dominated understandings gender (sex) and sexuality. The relationship between the two was understood as an expression of something natural, a universal order that was *heterosexual* and where ‘it is assumed that sex-gender-sexuality relate in a hierarchical, congruent and coherent manner’ (Richardson, 2007: 460). For instance, using this principle it was expected that a biological female should naturally grow up to experience herself as a female and have a feminine gender identity, and that her sexual practices and sexual identity should be heterosexual. This is what is meant by the principle of sexual and gender coherence. This helps us to understand why ‘cross gender identity’ (e.g. feminine men or masculine women) has historically been central

to theories of homosexuality. Within this approach sexuality is understood to be a property of gender, a gender that is pre-given and located in the gendered/sexed body. Thus, the masculinization of lesbians and the feminization of male homosexuals is also associated with understanding the lesbian and male homosexual body as 'cross gendered' (Richardson, 2007; Butler, 2011). This is evident, for example, in historical studies of medical accounts of 'homosexuality' that describe lesbians as boyish, with narrow hips, flat chests and 'spectacular clitorises' capable of vaginal penetration and male homosexuals having 'feminized' bodies (Terry, 1999), as well as more recent claims that gay men have 'feminized brains' (Le Vay, 2012).

Feminist approaches

Feminist writers, as I discussed earlier in the chapter, were among the first to challenge essentialist frameworks for understanding gender and sexuality. However what they did not do, in the main, was suggest that these two concepts should be decoupled from one another.

Feminist theories of gender offer two broad approaches to understanding the relationship between gender and sexuality. In the first of these:

- *Gender is prioritized over sexuality*

In most feminist accounts it is assumed that gender and sexuality need to be examined together and, also, that gender takes precedence over sexuality. That is, concepts of sexuality are understood to be largely founded upon notions of gender. This tradition is associated with earlier feminist writers such as Wittig (1981/1992) and Delphy

(1984), as well as more contemporary feminist work. For example, Stevi Jackson argues for the logical priority of gender over sexuality. She claims that ‘...without gender categories we could not categorize sexual desires and identities along the axis of same-gender or other-gender relationships, as heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual/lesbian’ (Jackson, 2012: 40). In other words, our understanding of sexual categories like ‘gay’ or ‘straight’ depend on knowing the gender of a person.

In the second main approach that I have identified in feminist work on gender:

- *Sexuality is prioritised over gender*

Here, sexuality is understood to be constitutive of gender. Traditionally this is an underlying assumption in psychoanalytic accounts, as well as informing the work of some feminists. For example, Catherine MacKinnon (1982) suggested that it is through the experience of sexuality, as it is currently constructed, that women learn about gender; learn what ‘being a woman’ means. As well as constituting our gendered subjectivities, MacKinnon argued that sexuality (heterosexuality in particular) is the cause of gender inequality: ‘Women and men are divided by gender, made into the sexes as we know them, by the social requirements of heterosexuality, which institutionalizes male sexual dominance and female sexual submission’ (MacKinnon, 1982: 516). From this perspective, understandings of gender are located in terms of an analysis of how sexuality both reflects and constitutes patriarchal values and practices (Walby, 1990). More recent feminist work has developed the argument that gender is an effect of sexuality. For example, Chrys Ingraham (1996,

2005) raises the question of whether without institutionalized heterosexuality gender would even exist.

In these debates, feminist theories have extended definitions of gender and sexuality in going beyond considerations of how the link between them is socially constructed, to viewing their relationship as one of the key mechanisms by which gender inequalities are (re)produced (Jackson and Scott, 2010)

Queer distinctions

The assumption that gender and sexuality need to be examined together remained relatively unchallenged until the emergence of queer theory in the 1990s. The distinction between sexuality and gender has been at the heart of debates about queer theory and its relationship to feminist thought. According to Merck et al. (1998:1) the emergence of queer theory meant that it and feminism were now ‘widely understood to be two fields of study’ with the investigation of sexuality seen as the ‘proper subject’ of queer theory and the analysis of gender that of feminism. While some agree with this position, many writers prefer instead to think about how feminist and queer theories are interconnected and can enrich each other (Richardson et al., 2012) and some write as queer/feminists.

Comment [n1]: No longer a box

Queer theory is associated with poststructuralist/postmodern approaches to sexuality and gender, and a critique of feminist theories of sexuality that are seen as limited by an emphasis on gender (Warner, 1993; Seidman, 1996; Jagose, 1997; Sullivan, 2004). (Equally, some feminists argue that queer theory risks paying insufficient attention to gender in its analyses of sexuality see, for example, Walters (2005) and Richardson

(2012).) It rejects the idea of stable and unified gender and sexual categories and emphasizes the fluidity, instability and fragmentation of identities and a multiplicity of sexuality and gender categories. Associated with this is a shift in 'definitions of gender away from social division towards an understanding of gender as cultural distinction.' (McLaughlin et al., 2012: 18). Queer theory also questions the assumption that there are specific connections between sex, gender and sexuality, what I referred to above as the principle of sexual and gender 'coherence'. In queer accounts the relationship between sexuality and gender is not seen as fixed and static, but as highly complex and unstable.

Various writers associated with queer theory have put forward arguments for theorizing sexuality independently from gender. Gayle Rubin's work has been influential in the development of such arguments. In the early 1980s Rubin argued that although connected gender and sexuality 'are not the same thing' (Rubin, 1984: 308). Opposed to the view that sexuality can be adequately understood as causing gender, Rubin instead offered an account of what she termed a 'sex/gender system' in which she separates out sexuality and gender. Queer writers have subsequently drawn on these ideas in developing their theories of gender. For example in what has become a queer 'classic', Eve Sedgwick in the *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990/ 2008). makes the case for a radical separation of gender and sexuality. Doing this, Sedgwick argues, opens up our understandings of gender and sexuality, as well the links between them, allowing more complex and diverse understandings. This means that new sexual and gender stories may begin to be told, heard and experienced. For instance, it allows the possibility to think about 'sexualities without genders' (Martin, 1998), where sexual desires, practices and identities do not depend on a person's

gender for their meaning. Similarly it enables recognition of the existence of multiple genders as illustrated, for example, by studies of female masculinities (Halberstam, 1998) and transgender (Monro, 2005; Hines, 2007; Stryker, 2008).

New imaginings: ‘patterned fluidities’

As I have indicated above, modernist understandings of gender and sexuality as fixed, coherent and stable have been challenged by queer/feminist, postmodern and poststructuralist accounts that conceptualise these categories as plural, provisional and situated. And if there are multiple genders and multiple sexualities then it is also likely that there will be multiple relationships between these categories. This means we need to consider how different sexual categories relate to different genders. A challenge for future theories of gender and sexuality, therefore, is to develop frameworks that allow more complex accounts of how gender and sexuality are related to each other.

To achieve this we need to consider the question of the relationship of gender and sexuality at a number of levels. This opens up the possibility that rather than thinking of gender and sexuality as separate areas of analysis, as do many queer theorists, or as interrelated, as do many feminist writers, they can be conceptualised as *both* depending on the level of analysis and the social context. Jackson (2012) identifies four levels of social construction of the relations between gender and sexuality.

- the structural;
- the level of social and cultural meaning;
- the level of everyday interactions and routine practices;

- the level of subjectivity.

At any one of these intersecting levels Jackson suggests that the relationship between gender and sexuality may be different. Like Jackson, I agree that we need to conceptualize gender at different levels to enable 'new ways of articulating and understanding the diversity of contemporary gender and sexual categories and the complexities of their relationship with one another' (Richardson, 2007: 458). In attempting to represent the connections between gender and sexuality a number of writers have used the metaphor of a theoretical 'knot' (Alsop et al., 2002) or a 'complex web' (Jackson, 2012). However, I would argue that these metaphors are too static to aid understandings of the relationship between gender and sexuality as a dynamic, historically and socially specific multilayered process. For this we need a different metaphor. Elsewhere I have outlined what might help us in this re-imagining (Richardson, 2007). This is the metaphor of the shoreline: a boundary in motion between land (configured as gender) and sea (configured as sexuality) and where, like the connections between genders and sexualities, there are 'patterned fluidities'.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a brief overview of some of the different ways in which we can theorize gender and the contribution that feminist work in particular has made. The references it contains and the suggestions for further reading given below will help you to develop your understanding and recognize the complexities of many of the ideas I have touched on. Examining theories of gender is important not only in an academic sense, but also because it is through analysing different ways of theorizing that we are able 'to interrogate the processes whereby people generally become

divided into the two categories male and female' (Alsop et al., 2002:2). This is a process of categorisation that, as the remainder of this book will demonstrate, has important social, economic and personal implications. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that the theories that we use to make sense of gender are part of this process and the meanings that derive from gender categorization. Theories of gender are not simply descriptions of 'what is', they actively structure the social worlds we inhabit. In the past, theories that assumed biology had a determining role in how we develop as women and men were used not merely to explain 'sex differences', but also to justify certain social arrangements as natural (Alsop et al., 2002). For instance, the idea that it was natural for women to want to have children and to care for them, and unnatural for men to feel the same, has often been used to both explain *and* justify why women have primary responsibility for childcare. In theorizing gender we are, then, actively engaged in a political process, an assumption that is central to the project of feminist gender theory. As McLaughlin et al. (2012: 18) state: 'If feminism has one legacy to take forward...it is the legitimacy of using political criteria as the marker for the validity of social theorising.' That is: the pursuit of knowledge not just for its own sake, but for social change. It is this that has inspired much of the research you will read about in this book and which continues to motivate teachers and students of gender and women's studies.

Further Reading

R. Alsop, A. Fitzsimons and K. Lennon (2002) *theorizing gender*, Oxford, Polity. This is a good overview of the important debates in theories of gender. The book discusses the major theories concerned with the way we 'become gendered'. There

are chapters on the body, men and masculinities, gender politics, and the relation between gender and sexuality, as well as discussion of transgender and queer approaches to understanding gender.

H. Bradley (2012) *Gender*, 2nd edn., Oxford, Polity. This is an accessible introduction to the concept of gender and the different theoretical approaches that have developed within women's and gender studies. It explores contemporary relations of masculinity and femininity and highlights how our thinking about gender is influenced by changing political contexts. It uses life narratives to help contextualize the theory.

R. W. Connell and R. Pearse (2014) *Gender*, 3rd edn., Oxford, Polity. This is a good introduction to the sociological study of gender. Written in a highly readable and accessible style, The authors trace the history of western ideas about gender, discusses the processes by which individuals become gendered as well as reviewing studies on gender differences. The book examines gender inequalities and patterns in modern society, and offers a contemporary framework for understanding gender in a global context drawing on empirical research from all over the world. The updated third edition also has a new chapter on ecofeminism, environmental justice and sustainability.

J. Marchbank and G. Letherby (2014) *Introduction to Gender: Social Science Perspectives*, 2nd edn., Harlow, Pearson Longman. An interdisciplinary introduction to the key themes and debates within gender studies, it explores how gender is analysed in different disciplines including history, sociology, social policy, anthropology, psychology, political science, pedagogy and geography. It then goes

on to look thematically at a number of key areas of debate in gender studies including family, health and illness, education, work and leisure, sex and sexuality, violence and resistance, crime and deviance, and culture and mass media.

A.S. Wharton (2011) *The Sociology of Gender. An Introduction to Theory and Research*, 2nd edn., London, Wiley-Blackwell. This book presents an introductory overview of gender theory and research, including cross-national studies. It examines gender through three different frameworks: individualistic (the ways in which gender shapes individuals), interactional (gender in social interactions) and institutional (how gender is built into organizations, social structures and institutional arrangements). Also addressed is the importance of analysing how gender intersects with other kinds of distinctions such as those based on race, ethnicity, sexuality etc.

Questions

1. How can it be argued that gender is a 'social construct'?
2. What does it mean to refer to gender as social division?
3. How has the sex/gender binary been important in understanding gender?
4. What is the relationship between gender and sexuality?

? What difficulties might be associated with a 'de-gendering' of society? What advantages might there be?

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